

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Media-led investigations aren't the way to beat doping in sport

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Kenyan athletes exercise in the early morning near a high-altitude training camp. Reuters/Siegfried Modola

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New allegations of doping in Kenya have surfaced just ahead of the Rio Olympics. They include athletes and coaches from other countries, making Kenya seem like a dopers' paradise with little testing or concern about drug taking.

The most recent allegations followed a joint investigation by journalists from the British Sunday Times and German broadcaster ARD. This is not the first time that such accusations have been highlighted in the international media. For example, in November 2015 it was alleged that three Kenyan marathon runners paid bribes to the governing body, Kenya Athletics, for favourable, lenient bans.

A year earlier, 25 Kenyans were identified as having potentially suspicious blood data scores when details were leaked of data collected by the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF). High profile athletes have been caught doping and there are ongoing problems with the integrity of the country's anti-doping education and testing system. Moreover, an Italian sports agent working in Kenya has been charged with doping offences, and an Italian coach remains under suspicion.

It seems unlikely that the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) will impose any further sanctions before the games. But the

most recent allegations are grist to the mill for detractors who suspect Kenyan training camps are a hotbed of doping.

Are these allegations fair? Are they based on substantiated facts? The tougher question to ask is whether or not Kenya is being treated fairly. If Kenya is unduly the focus of such media interest, the ideal of the level playing field is paradoxically undermined by the unique treatment afforded to the East African nation.

This is not just about the selection of Kenya as a subject for investigation but also about methods. Secret filming is controversial: it potentially infringes rights to privacy, can create artificial situations that provoke an abnormal response, and in this case the doctors quickly denied their apparent claims and intentions. A Scottish athlete training in Kenya denied claims he was involved in the media “sting” and a Kenyan athlete claims he was “duped” by the reporters.

Perhaps this story is not as straightforward as would first appear. Indeed it arguably undermines one of the central principles of anti-doping: fair play.

So what do we know?

The Sunday Times/ARD joint investigating team secretly filmed Kenyan doctors who claimed to have prescribed Erythropoietin (EPO) to more than 50 athletes, three of whom are British. EPO is an essential hormone for red blood cell production that has been widely linked to endurance sports.

The journalists also apparently found evidence of doping in waste bins at the high performance training centre training camp on the outskirts of Iten in the Rift Valley. The doctors are now denying those claims and local officials claim to be working hard to ensure the camp is clean through drug testing procedures. Indeed, the camp’s owners strenuously denied the accusation.

Ostensibly this is a significant story that helps support anti-doping. But it raises more questions than it answers. Even the specific details of this case are sketchy. The athletes in question have not been named. And as far as the doctors' involvement is concerned, we are still waiting to see if any investigating authority can access patient records or prescriptions. Without that information, evidence is based solely on recorded conversations which can be denied.

Why Kenya continues to be the focus of investigations and accusations, is very unclear and potentially unfair. Many other countries have problems with their anti-doping system, have athletes who dope and doctors who support them.

No level playing field

Questions of fairness extend beyond asking why Kenya is under so much scrutiny and how good the evidence is. The World Anti-Doping Code is based on the ideal of a level

playing field and the right of athletes to participate in drug-free sport.

Yet, there is a lot of ambivalence over the anti-doping agency's power and role in recent media-led investigations. It is unclear what responsibility WADA has, and how it reacts to media stories. The US Senator John Thune recently wrote to the WADA President, Sir Craig Reedie, asking why WADA is not more proactive in its approach to investigations.

It was in fact the Sunday Times and ARD that uncovered doping in Russia and leaked details of more than 12,000 blood tests taken by the international athletics federation last summer that showed suspicious cases had not been followed up and doping was potentially as serious in athletics as it was in cycling.

If there was a level playing field, decisions over which sport or country to target using methods designed to deceive people into implicating themselves would be undertaken on the basis of some other criteria than just where to find a front page scandal. The same would apply to which individual athletes to target.

The right of athletes to participate in drug-free sport is arguably the best reason to support such intensive research methods. Maybe journalists can uncover more hotbeds of doping and root out the cheats. The problem is that this will always be a subjective exercise. It can never uncover all the doping that goes on even though we know for certain it is much higher than the 1%-2% of athletes whose samples test positive.

So we are no closer to drug-free sport in spite of these occasional forays into the field by journalists.

Reputational damage

There is the added factor of reputational damage. Athletes in most countries have not faced the same evidence-gathering processes. If they pass normal drug tests they are assumed to be clean.

But the reputation of Kenyans and Russians has been tainted. And many sports fans won't accept that they are clean even if they have never tested positive.

Given these criticisms the reputational damage done to Kenyan athletes, and by implication anyone who has trained in Kenya, seems irrational. Any success in the Olympics will be tainted by the legacy of this story.

The role of official agencies

It will be interesting to see how WADA responds. The various scandals of the past two to three years have led to calls for more action, including criminalisation of doping. Yet, WADA's foundational principles include harmonisation and standardisation: anti-doping should treat everyone equally.

WADA also depends upon national anti-doping organisations and local sports organisations to support anti-doping. In countries where there is a lack of commitment and resources there may be gaps in the system.

Also, WADA seems to assume all countries have the economic infrastructure to support anti-doping. But in areas of real poverty it might be hard to justify public expenditure on increasing testing. This is a first world policy with unrealistic expectations of developing countries.

Kenya may or may not be a hotbed of doping. It is unlikely to be worse than many other places as the motivation to dope crosses international boundaries and sports. Perhaps it would be fairer if consistency and rigour informed investigations rather than the editorial vigour of the Sunday Times and ARD.



Russia WADA Doping Athletics Rio Olympics EPO Kenya